

KAMBARA, A FAMINE ISLE

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volcanic island of Lakemba, home of the high chief of Lau, 131
far out of sight to the north. Visible between Komo and 133
Namuka is the fertile volcanic island of Mothe, the point of
departure of canoes for the Tongan archipelago, 400 miles to
the east. Visible to the east is the uninhabited Yangasa cluster
of islets, and to the southeast Fulanga and Ongea, all of forested
limestone formation. Out of sight still farther to the south
lie Vatoa and Ono, the southernmost islands in the Lau group.

Kambarans have relatives on most of these islands, as well 602
as on the Moala group to the west, and in the Fijian capital
city of Suva. These kinship ties demark the boundaries of
their physical world. Only within the limits of this world,
among their relatives, are they at home.

Kambara is called the "cave of wealth" on account of her 137
forests of hardwood. The most valued hardwood is greenheart 322
of India (*Intsia bijuga*) used for making sailing canoes and 439
other woodwork. Although the finest greenheart is found on
Kambara, it grows well also on the neighboring islands of
Wangaya, Fulanga, and Ongea, but nowhere else in Fiji or
Tonga. Based upon this natural monopoly, a famous wood-
craft industry has developed in southern Lau. The group
formerly supplied Fiji and Tonga with fast and powerful
large double war canoes, and still provides many parts of
Fiji with picturesque mat-sailed canoes, used extensively on
inter-island voyages, and with shining carved wooden bowls,
gongs and headrests.

In spite of forest resources, Kambara, Fulanga and Ongea 134
are known in Fiji as "famine isles" on account of the dearth
of arable land. The limestone base of these three islands, and
of Wangaya and Yangasa as well, has not decomposed suffi-
ciently to form good garden land, and pockets of arable soil
are scarce and shallow. Gardening, the usual basis of sub- 134
sistence in Lau, must be supplemented in the famine group 222

¹ "Nggara-ni-tambua": literally whale's tooth cave, for the ivory tooth of the sperm 435
whale represents the highest value in Lau.

291 rank. Outside a village the natives often wind a piece of cloth about their heads as a protection against the sun. Hats are not worn.

292 For Sunday services in the mission church, and ceremonies in honor of visiting British officials on Kambara, the men tuck a clean white shirt into the *lavalava* and the women don [294] a simple sleeveless blouse. Clothes are sewn on a few sewing machines which found their way to the islands during the prosperous days of the copra trade. Lately the natives have [433] had some difficulty in keeping themselves clothed on account of the low price of copra which they exchange for cloth at the local store in Tokalau. Clothes are usually very ragged, especially those of the old people, and occasionally instead of trade cloth a gunny sack or a fringe of banana leaves is worn while working in the gardens.

296 The introduction of cloth brought a laundry problem to 312 Kambara, an island where fresh water has always been scarce. At the present time most of the fresh water collected on Kambara and also the brackish water from the springs is used for washing clothes. Soap, bluing and heavy charcoal irons for pressing must be bought at the store. On Saturday mornings the young girls wash near the water barrels under the eaves. Beating the clothes with a stick against a board, they raise a billowing froth of rainbow-hued suds to make up for lack of water.

515 Considering the rough close-to-nature existence, and the 136 lack of fresh water on these islands, I was impressed with the personal cleanliness of the Lauans. Men, women and children bathe daily in the lagoon, usually at sundown before the evening meal. This is done in spite of the danger of sharks which are common in these waters. Children are [868] taught from babyhood to keep a keen lookout for their dark menacing forms, which are occasionally seen darting about in the lagoon right up to the shore line.

556/431 centralization of wealth and brings about its continual redistribution. The underlying principle is clearly expressed in the native soliciting system. Under the soliciting system a man loses face if he refuses to give up property solicited by a relative. However, the recipient is under obligation to the donor, who has the right to retaliate by soliciting something of greater value from him at some future time. Hence the institution is really a system of reciprocal gift exchange. One day I gave a necklace of bright green beads to one of the girls in Tokalau. The next day I noticed another Tokalau girl wearing it. In the course of time the green necklace traveled from neck to neck through the village, and when I visited Undu at the other end of the island there it was ornamenting one of the Undu belles.

556/431/585 The native soliciting system does not differ in principle from other types of exchange in Lau such as the *solevu*, which has been described in connection with a Lauan wedding. The *solevu* is a competitive type of ceremonial gift exchange between related groups. As we have seen, marriage in Lau initiates a series of *solevus* between the inter-marrying clans. Inter-island trade on a large scale is carried on mainly through *solevus* between villages. The *solevu* ceremonial pattern varies in detail, but always involves the display of property belonging to the rival groups by means of processions, piling up on the village ceremonial ground and the ceremonial presentation of property by each donor group, acceptance by the recipients, feasting, and dancing. Whale's teeth, mats, tapa, food, woodwork, canoes, and sennit are the most important articles of exchange. Tribute is also presented by means of the *solevu* at the high chief's court on important occasions such as the marriage or death of the chief.

435/436 Under the old native system there was no definite standard by which the relative value of objects of exchange could be measured. True money was absent. The most valued object in Lau was, and still is, the beautiful polished ivory tooth

- 435 (*tambua*) of the sperm whale. The whale's tooth serves as
 436 a medium of exchange and as a means by which wealth can
 be accumulated, condensed, and stored. It cannot, however,
 serve as a standard of value because its ceremonial significance
 imparts to it an immeasurably sacred value which cannot be
 compared with the exchange value of other objects. The
 [556] indefinite term "big" (*levu*) is used to express victory in the
 economic competition of gift exchange. The donor whose
 gift is "big" wins prestige.

431 The Lauan principle of gift exchange emphasizes communal
 556 industry and group prestige rather than individual enterprise.
 476 It would completely discourage initiative were it not reciprocal
 and self-perpetuating. In an exchange of property each party
 seeks to give more than he receives and thus through a material
 loss to secure a social gain. But the gain in prestige is not
 permanent. A man or group must continue to distribute in
 order to maintain the acquired status. Hence it is really the
 far-sighted, industrious man or group which wins in the long
 run. Work is rewarded and laziness loses out.

732 The case of Wai illustrates the point. Wai is a half-caste
 158 whose mother was a native from the island of Komo and
 554 whose father was a European. He is the most maladjusted
 individual on Kambara. He is physically handicapped not
 only because of his small bones and relatively short stature
 but also because he limps badly. Any physical defect such
 as lameness, blindness, or elephantiasis is mocked by the
 natives, and on this account Wai has had his share of ridicule.
 [797] Besides, Wai is classed as a bastard which, since the advent of
 [848] the missionaries, has been severely censored. Since his father
 was a European, the natives insist that he has no clan and
 no land. However, he has been given the use of land in the
 clan of his wife's mother who came from Tokalau.

158 Wai is known as the laziest man on Kambara. At the
 554 time of our visit to Kambara he had a house in Tokalau, but
 the thatched roof leaked, and he with his wife and bastard

439 neglected, and the natives began to buy food from the store.
245 The native culture began to break down. The trade cutter
178 almost completely replaced the sailing canoe, and during this
period the large double war canoe disappeared. The art of
pottery making by the Levuka women of Lakemba³⁸ fell into
disuse as native clay pots were displaced by large imported
metal ones. The technic of making fish hooks was lost,
and imported paraphernalia such as lines, nets, and ropes
were used instead of native products. Iron roofs appeared on
the houses of the most prosperous natives, and even a few
small metal tanks were used to catch the rain water from them.

[554] A factor of great significance in the decline of native material
culture during this period was the social prestige attached to
all imported articles. Everyone strove to buy as much as
possible from the store, and the number of imported articles
which a group possessed was limited only by its ability to
pay the price in copra. Clothes, iron roofs, canned food, and
metal tools all became the means by which a person might
raise his status in the community.

464 At this time native labor was in great demand, especially
177 on copra plantations in many parts of Fiji, and large numbers
of young men from the southern islands left their villages
under contract to work for periods of a year or more. While
away the young men came under greater western influence
than had penetrated to the isolated southern islands, and
when they returned they brought not only new goods and
money but also new ideas. The loss of the young men of
the village not only cut the available supply of labor but also
upset the balance of sexes in the villages. It led to the post-
ponement of the marriage age of the young people. In spite
[161] of this factor the population of Lau began to increase.

439 As in many parts of the South Seas, the period of prosperity
245 in Fiji ended abruptly with the slump in the price of copra
435 after the world war. Largely because of overproduction and

³⁸ L. Thompson, "The Pottery of the Lau Islands, Fiji," *op. cit.*

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competition with the whale oil industry, the market price of copra fell from £25 to £8 per ton between 1920 and 1935.³⁹

Copra production was also severely curtailed in the early 20's by the spread of the purple moth (*Levuana iridescens*) from Viti Levu, where it had been known for at least sixty years, to Ovalau, and thence to many parts of Fiji including the Lau islands. The colonial government introduced a two-winged parasitic fly (*Ptychomyia remota*) from the Federated Malay States, which by 1929 had brought the pest under control and by 1936 had caused its almost complete extinction. Moreover, plantations were attacked by the coconut scale (*Aspidiotus destructa*), which is being successfully combated by a coccinellid beetle imported by the government from Java.

The great depression that struck the western world in 1929 did not affect Lau until 1931, but in that year the demand for copra fell away sharply. Communication with the outside world practically ceased, and most of the trade stores were abandoned. The natives suddenly found themselves deprived of the easy means of obtaining western trade goods on which they had become dependent. Their only recourse was to their old life. Neglected gardens were cleared and replanted, native crafts were revived, and inter-island trade was resumed. The southern island once more became the center of canoe building, woodwork, barkcloth, and mat making in Fiji. Involuntarily

³⁹ Annual copra exports from the colony since 1922 are shown in the following table:

Year	Quantity tons	Total value (£)	Year	Quantity tons	Total value (£)
1922	21,987		1930	23,882	369,524
1923	24,161		1931	16,917	177,786
1924	25,137	484,496	1932	15,076	130,240
1925	24,133	497,713	1933	22,597	195,788
1926	27,868	573,475	1934	23,526	125,941
1927	26,560	534,416	1935	26,081	220,478
1928	27,947	567,254	1936	34,581	406,393
1929	33,226	563,978			

(Annual Reports, Fiji, 1922-36.)

439 the natives regained most of their economic independence.
 178 However, a few trade articles such as bush knives, metal axes,
 434 trade cloth, soap, and cooking pots, have so far proved indispensable, and in 1934 enough copra was produced to exchange for these bare necessities which were still obtainable at a few centers. By this time there was no regular transportation to and from southern Lau. Most of the traveling of the natives was done by sailing canoes which had been revived. Otherwise an occasional visit by a Chinese owned trade cutter to replenish the supply of trade goods, a government ship for inspection, or a wandering scientist were the only contacts with the outside world.

731 The situation caused by the depressed market of 1931 was
 439 aggravated by a hurricane which hit the Fiji islands in that
 435 year. Actually the lowest point in the copra depression in
 245 Fiji was not reached until 1934, when the local price fell to £3.12.6 per ton.⁴⁰ Since 1934 the price and the production of copra has increased until 34,581 tons were produced at about £9.5.4 per ton in 1936. However, the price of copra was still barely high enough to cover the cost of production.

439 It is estimated that two-thirds of the 1936 copra crop in
 245 Fiji was produced by natives. This indicates that the native production of copra is increasing rapidly, but native methods of drying are primitive and tend to produce a poor quality of copra which sells at lower than market price. For some years the department of agriculture has been experimenting with small cheap types of hot air dryers in an effort to perfect a type suitable for use by native producers. A type of sawn
 [654] timber kiln costing from £5 to £6 was first erected for demonstration purposes at the Agricultural Station at Navuso. This kiln produces copra which sells at a premium of 10s. per ton. Under government encouragement the natives are gradually becoming interested in it and this interest is spreading throughout the Fiji group. A satisfactory kiln made of

⁴⁰ It is estimated that 50% of the crop of 23,536 tons was produced by natives.

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323 The pots were made in a shed, according to the built-up,
 463 lump-technique of the Levukans. Two main types of pots
 438 were made: *ndolokoto* and *ndari*. The *ndolokoto* was a large
 cooking-pot, one to two metres high, and up to one and a
 half metres in diameter. The pot was rounded, so that it
 could not stand upright. It was laid on its side on two
 stones over the fire. The pot had two narrow mouths, one
 at each end. The *ndari* was a basin or bowl made in various
 [531] sizes and used for kava or for pudding. It was decorated
 with incised geometric designs around the rim. The
 Kambara women traded mats for Levuka pots. Occasionally
 the Kambara men obtained pots in Levuka.

The Kambara women were not pot-makers, but
 informants remember that one woman who made pots lived
 in Tokalau for many years. Her name was Tara Nevini
 from Nandurumbua sib, Nggalikarua village, Matuku. She
 left Kambara just before the measles epidemic in 1875.

[517] On Oneate, the Levuka women made pots of red clay
 (*nggele ndamu*) found on the hills, mixed with black sand
 (*nuku loaloo*) from Sovilolo, a beach on the island. According
 to Tui Oneate (chief of Oneate), when the Levuka people
 were succeeded by Katumbalevu, they moved to Oneate,
 where they lived until they were recalled to Lakemba.*

Pots were imported into southern Lau from the island
 of Matuku. They were made in the village of Nggalikarua.

Pots from Kandavu were also traded in southern Lau.
 On Kambara they were exchanged for barkcloth (*ngatu*),
 wooden kava-bowls (*kumete ni yanggona*), food-bowls
 (*kumete ni kana manioke*), perfumed oil (*waliwali*), and
 digging-sticks (*saupa*). There was no standard of value,
 [435] but the women say one large Kandavu pot was equivalent
 to about one wooden kava-bowl or to one sheet of barkcloth
 (*ngatu*) (about three by three metres) and one container
 (*fango*) of coconut-oil.

[439] Pots from fabrication centres in Tailevu on Viti Levu
 also found their way to Lau.

* For further information concerning the Levuka potters see
 Hocart, A.M., *The Lau islands, Fiji, Bishop Museum Bul. 62, 1929,*
 pp. 16-19.

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in front of us, and then waited while the leading *matapuli* of the Nayau people came forward, and, sitting down, laid his hands on the nuts and made a little speech to us, asking that the great chief should excuse any faults he might see, and deal mercifully with the people and protect them as always. 123
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Our *matapuli* then touched the offerings as usual, and spoke a few words in reply, saying that we accepted the offering and that we hoped the land would flourish and the people increase and prosper. This presentation of the nuts on their branch is always called *Ai Fono ni nona cudra*¹ or "the dam against his wrath"; in other words, a propitiatory gift.

The Nayau *matapuli* then came along, crouching, and bringing a number of ivory whales' teeth or *tabua*, heavy curved yellow tusks, each about nine inches long and supported from the two ends by a loop of dyed and twisted coco-nut fibre sinnet. These were offered with a few deprecatory sentences, speaking of "these insignificant teeth" in true Oriental style, though they are actually in this part of the Pacific the greatest gift it is possible to offer, and have an importance far above their intrinsic value. [In the old days the offer (and acceptance) of a *tabua* to a chief meant that any request accompanying it could

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¹ "Dono" in Fijian.